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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: TURKEY'S CHIEF RABBI ASSESSES COMMUNITY'S SITUATION

REF: ISTANBUL 1625

Classified By: Consul General Deborah K. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. Turkey's Chief Rabbi, Rav Isak Haleva, underlined concerns in the Jewish community over a growing "negativity" in the minds of average Turks toward Jews as demonstrated in the press and daily interchanges between neighbors. Describing Turks as characteristically and traditionally hospitable and sympathetic to strangers, Rabbi Haleva said the well was being poisoned in Turkey. While he saw hope in the EU accession process for legal reforms, he said the importance to the Jewish community of positive U.S./Turkish relations could not be overstated. He noted that the Community's traditionally low key and cooperative approach with the GOT had enabled it to succeed where other minorities had failed, for example in the re-opening of a synagogue some 50 years earlier. End summary.

MANIPULATION BY EXTREMISTS

12. (C) During EUR/SE desk officer Paul Malik's trip to Istanbul September 28-29, we took the opportunity to call on the Jewish Community's Chief Rabbi, Rav Isak Haleva, who was joined by Community Vice President Sami Herman and Executive Director Lina Filiba. Haleva drew our attention to traditionally charitable feelings of Turks; they are personally warm and go out of their way to assist anyone in need, no matter how poor. Even in small villages in Turkey, it is customary to receive any visitor warmly and to offer hospitality and assistance as needed. Haleva said the Jewish Community worked easily with people as he had just described, but that there was a down side to the trait. This overall outlook was often wedded in Turkey to a certain simple naivete that was subject to manipulation. With a significant increase in negative, anti-Semitic stories in print and other media, the Community feels increasingly endangered based on their historical experience and the signals they see here with increased frequency in their daily lives.

13. (C) The Rabbi detailed some of the factors contributing to a downward spiral in the Community's own sense of well-being. The summer crisis in Lebanon had been "hijacked" and turned into a Muslim versus Jew conflict. He said the extremist image-makers -- not all or even mostly in Turkey -- had done this purposely to build it into a generalized conflict of cultures. It was in extremists' interest to paint the conflict as a clash between one group and another so as to invite sympathy and support from among the larger Muslim community both within and outside of Lebanon. Some Turkish leaders, Haleva suggested, felt the need to run for political cover and give rhetorical support to a popularized sense of a clash between peoples. Though the Rabbi implied the Jewish Community understood political realities, these statements nevertheless would leave wounds. The messages had

a strongly negative effect on Turkish society as a whole, particularly among the more poorly educated who tended to focus only on underlying or subtle anti-Semitic messages in political statements. The Community had begun seriously to worry, he said, about the "negative psychological atmosphere" augmented by poison flowing from the pens of some leading "Islamist" leaders. The danger was that although Turks and Muslims tended to look the other way if someone took their money, they lost all perspective and rational logic if their deepest feelings were stirred.

VITAL TURKEY-AMERICAN RELATIONS

¶4. (C) Haleva and Herman underlined the importance to the Community of good Turkish/American relations. A good feeling between Turkey and the United States had great rewards. Haleva particularly appreciated the consistent U.S. effort to support Turkey's EU accession, explaining the Community had seen strong evidence of positive changes as the GOT broadened legal and other protections for all citizens as part of the EU accession process. The Rabbi said that he viewed continued positive working relationship between the United States and Turkey as in the Community's vital interest. "We see you as essential," he said and, "you have my prayers." Switching to English, he commented that prayer is supposed to be free but in this case, his prayers were not free -- to him, they were obligatory -- it was that important an issue to them. The Community had sought the meeting with Prime Minister Erdogan (reftel) because of rising tensions, not only as a result of Lebanon, but also flowing from anti-Americanism as religious and nationalist extremism found voice in Turkey. Community Vice President Herman cited polls indicating Turks believe the U.S. is an enemy of Turkey and

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though the Prime Minister had "worked against anti-Semitism" in Turkey, a television program recently told viewers the Torah permitted the killing of women and children.

¶5. (C) The answer to raising the poor image of the United States in Turkey, according to Haleva and Herman, was to attack the PKK problem. Turkey's leadership, they said, recognizes it is hard for the U.S. to act against the PKK in Northern Iraq because of the U.S. interest in continued stability in that area. However, at the end of the day, from the leadership down, Turks feel in their gut that anyone not stopping the PKK is just plain against Turkey. This is why there is a strong undercurrent of anti-U.S. rhetoric at "martyrs' funerals" for those killed by PKK terrorism with the implicit message that the U.S. is to blame for that death. The atmosphere is further spoiled by politicians espousing nationalist/populist views in the pre-election season. In this context, it is not fashionable for the mainstream press to defend the United States and a downward trend continues.

GETTING TO "YES" IN TURKEY

¶6. (C) Rabbi Haleva noted that while some minority communities consistently underline the non-cooperation of Turkish authorities, local and national, with respect to desired projects and property issues, others, like the Jewish Community, do not express concerns publicly and even say very little privately on these matters. The Chief Rabbi described his community's approach of quiet cooperation with Turkish authorities as the secret to their success in maintaining or broadening minority opportunities in Turkey. In the 1940s, the Jewish Community listed, as then required by law, 95 to 98 percent of properties owned by the Community. Haleva said that other minority communities generally tried to "hide" their holdings. As a result of that "non-confrontational approach," the Rabbi said the Community received cooperation on a range of issues, even where no legal structure exists to facilitate a given request. As an example, he cited the

special permission received to build a synagogue on the Asian side of Istanbul some 50 years ago. This was done quietly and extra-legally, "using the Ottoman mentality." Today, the street in front of that active community synagogue takes its name from the structure.

17. (C) Comment. The Jewish Community has lived comfortably in Turkey since the days of the Spanish Inquisition and their culturally sensitive approach to problem-solving has served them well. The Community is by no means monolithic, however, and earlier this summer -- prior to the events in Lebanon -- some senior Community leaders were privately critical of the Chief Rabbi for his "Pollyannaish" approach to growing harassment as well as his very public, albeit oblique, criticisms (carried in a local daily) of certain Istanbul community members he accused of inappropriately seeking the limelight. Indeed, there was talk of voting him out. Clearly he has turned a listening ear and now acknowledges the growing unease within the Community, a result both of regional events and anti-Americanism focused largely on the PKK in Iraq, and resultant nationalist/populist political impulses. Though supportive of EU accession for Turkey, Istanbul's Jews do not sense the EU can effectively replace the overall positive influence of American friendship toward Turkey. End comment.
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